THE RIVERSIDE CHURCH

RIVERSIDE DRIVE AT 122ND STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10027

April 19, 1967

Dear Dick,

I have been waiting for you to get back to London before replying to your last letter, and I am glad I did. I trust you have had a pleasant trip. I envy your travels even more this week as we are enjoying (?) cold rainy weather that is like those dreary fall days all over again. I hope the weather is doing better by you there. I was much encouraged by your last letter. It seems to me that in many ways the relationship between us is getting cleared and we are starting out with an even break again. I think this may be of great importance to you in the light of a piece of news which burst upon us this week. I am certain that Jim McCracken will have written to you about it (he said he was) but in case there is a delay on his part, I think it is appropriate that you should know what is going on.

The word is, that after much thought and agonizing, Jim has come to the place where he feels that he must take an early retirement and has set June 4th as the deadline. In his letter, which will be going to the congregation in a couple days, he spells out some of the things which have brought him to this decision and they are mostly things which are familiar to you already. There is his health which has been precarious since he came back from Madiera. He has been under a good deal of strain this year and he has paid for it physically.

There is also in his mind the great need to get Maude out of Beacon and under his roof again. He will not really be satisfied until she is home with him and he feels he must now give that priority over his church commitments. He also mentions the feeling that the frustration of conducting only a Sunday ministry without being able to participate in the life of the church and community is intolerable to him.

He is very firm about the resignation and will not listen to any attempt to talk him out of it, so we just have to accept his decision as final. He does not want to make any decisions about what will happen in the future except that he will not allow us to hold any kind of public farewell for him. He will make a statement at the Strawberry Festival but will not permit any kind of speeches, greetings, testimonials or the life. Considering his physical situation, we can understand this need, butit will be difficult for the church to find ways to express the depth of its feeling of gratitude and affection for him.

There are a great many implications of this decision for the church. The Pulpit Committee has met and made some decisions that will shape the future. They have decided that they will not be rushed into hurrying the process of finding Jim's successor and as a result they have set an anticipation that if they have found one by fall of

1968 they will be doing well. This means that we shall have an interim year which will be much like the one in which Jim was on sabbatical. Council I will be asked to designate special "family" times like Homecoming, Budget Sunday, etc. when it will be most appropriate for me to preach, and the other times will be filled with men whom the pulpit committee will invite to come on the basis of being a potential candidate for the pulpit. It will lend a certain air of excitement to the services, and there is the general feeling that people will want to be there to see the man who may be the next preaching minister.

So much for the church end of things. I have realized almost from the first that this decision of Jim's will have a far reaching effect on you and upon how you see yourself in the future. You have often expressed the feeling that Jim has been the mainstay for you at Riverside, and I have the feeling that it will seem to you that one of your major props has just been pulled out. I was, it seems, somewhat prophetic in my statement last time that the "good old days of Riverside are gone now, and that we will have to find a new look to serve a new congregation. I think that this is the end of an era and what the new look will be is not yet known.

It seems to me that one of the first questions you will be asking is whether the decision of Jim's will mean that he has abandoned you. I don't think he feels that this is so. However, realistically speaking, he has said that he will be part of no decisions from here on out about the future, and this would include your future plans, I believe. I think I understand him correctly in feeling that the decision is now not in his hands but in the hands of the Boards. When they will act definitively nobody can say. I think what they do will certainly have to be conditioned by the fact of Jim's decision.

Because that is the case, and because I have been of the opinion that no matter what the decision was going to be, it ought to be made once and for all and the facts be communicated to you, I feel the need to write you in what I hope will be an off-the=record way with no official status attached in any way to what I am saying. I find myself frustrated that there are so many middle men. THe Boards are talking with your doctors and there is a great deal of static and misunderstanding between them. You have indicated that you are not always sure what is meant by what you are being told medically and it seems that the whole situation is a communications mess. I am therefore taking far more responsibility than I should be taking and writing you VERY PRIVATELY trying to fulfill the "Dutch Uncle" role that I talked about last time. You may throw this away or do whatever you want when you are finished reading. I feel just to say some of these things clearly to you will be the best service I can do you and perhaps will help clear the air for you even more.

This is between us!!!!!

To begin with, what nobody has probably said clearly to you is that

there is the definite feeling that the action taken in sending you off on sabbatical, as well-intentioned as it might be on the part of those of us who were involved, was not an appropriate action. The Boards have challenged our rights to have made this decision even in the face of the grant that made it possible. They do not feel that those of us who talked to you had the authority to make any ultimate commitments to you. They respect the fact that you were sent for help and care, but they feel that they ought to have had the say about what the future will be. I think some of us feel very much on the hot seat about this and regret that what seemed to be good and fair and logical was not representative of decisions made by the Boards who might have had other things to say. THis is unfortunate for all of us, and it has been one of the complicating factors all along.

They think the leave ought to have been terminal.

This does not mean they don't think you may have improved.

I believe I express the general feeling of the Boards in saying that they feel that it will be impossible for you to make a go of the situation here again. The situation has changed a great deal since your absence. They have heard expressions from the choir, even people who admire and love you as a person, who have expressed their feeling that moving back to your leadership will be too much of a shift. They have also heard from the people (and there are many of them) who have said that they will leave the choir before your return. The Boards feel that you are going to be faced with an impossible situation in which you will inevitably be humiliated and defeated. They do not want this to happen.

Look at it, if you can, from an objective point of view and you will see what they are trying to say to you. If you return there will be a situation here that is not the one you left. There is almost nothing in it that will offer support to you except those personal supports (as different from job supports) which some of us may bring. Jim will be gone, and I know something of what this means. You will have an interim period and then a new man will come in.

DUring the coming year, if you return, it has been made clear to me that the Boards anticipate that I will give the music program a kind of supervision nobody ever had before (Some of them go so far as to suggest that I shall monitor choir rehearsals...a silly suggestion but you see what is in their mind!) The first time that anything goes wrong with the music, it is the end. You will have been put in a position where the first time you get emotional, the first time you throw a tantrum, the first dirty word or lewd remarks, the first conflict you have with a choir member will be enough to bring up al the past, and there will be no recourse for you. You will be done. Even a saint could not live under those conditions, and whatever else you are, a saint, I think, is not one of the things! These will be the boundaries which will be drawn, and I will be held to living within them. It will be terrible for me to do so, and I do not think for a minute that you are capable of doing so. This is not a judgment on your future as much as a reflection that out of your past there is now such a head of distrust that there is literally no leeway left for you. The feeling is that if you return it will be just a matter of time until you blow, and then you will be fired and your career will be damaged in spite of your past record.

I know from hearing the discussions that it is the hope of both boards that you would not let this happen, either for your own good or for

the good of the church. If they were honest with you, as I am trying to be right now, they would say that they feel you ought to indicate that you do not intend to return to the post at Riverside but resign. WIth Jim's departure, the situation has become even more critical than it was before. The Boards have held back because of Jim's personal affection for you and partly because they knew that dismissal would be a worry that they did not want to put on him physically and emotionally. This risk has now been eliminated. The feeling now is that they must do everything possible to insure that the coming year will be one of the most stable years it can be. When your reutrn represents the risks which I have described above, I think you can see how they could feel that they hope you will bid yourself out, and that they will not have to do this for you.

I have heard enough discussions that I know the officials are concerned that you not be thrust out into the cold. They are prepared, I think, to talk with you about how they might help you be undergirded pension-wise and until you might find some other situation. (Be very careful here, Dick, because I am giving my opinion, and as you know, my opinions can be very wrong when it comes to reading the mind of the Boards!)
You might want to test this against Carroll.
I think you really need to give some calm reflection to what is best for you to do. The Boards, believe it or not, are trying to be fair as they can to you in the situation. They genuinely do not want to have to fire you, either before or after a trial period. But they are also dictated to by the needs of the situation and they cannot help but feel that coming back would be worse in the long run. THey cannot handle the risks which you will present for them but they do not want to be in the position of calling your hand if there is any better way.

Obviously I have not done any concrete thinking or investigating but there ought to be other alternatives possible for you. You staft from a position of strength not defeat. Your slate is clean. Your bills are paid, you should have achieved some sense of rest and relaxation and be ready to dig into something which would stimulate and challenge you. You have a reputation and a long tenure. I would think there would be many doors open to you, ones which, as I have indicated before, would have the prospect of lasting beyond your mandatory retirement here. I would think a new career now would be much easier than a new career at age 65/

I am sure that this sounds awfully harsh, and perhaps it is. Please believe me when I say that I write this in the greatest amount of love and concern for you that I can muster. I think you must know and understand the situation clearly and why people are acting the way they are. This is what I have tried to spell out for you. I believe I have presented it accurately and were you to sample the people on the Joint Committe (they might be horrified to know I have been so blunt and direct about it) they would agree that this is a true picture of the situation. I feel that the only way you can react honestly is if you know what the truth is about the situation, and this is what I am trying to present. I would not be your friend or your Dutch Uncle Pastor if I tried to act as if it were different.

You will first have to decide if you will accept my analysis as the true one. I do not really know how you can find out whether it is true or not. Carroll, I believe, would concur in this judgment. I understand that there have been more letters to your doctors but they have been done by the Boards without my seeing them. If you agree with what I have said, it
I don't know what they may have said to you directly

seems to me you will have to decide your next steps with care. Nobody can make the decision for you. I think I only want to say that what you do ought to be something you do from your own conviction and with your own self=respect. If it is done out of defensiveness or anger or despair it will be the wrong thing, no matter what it is.

I am trying to say a couple things clearly and hope you have heard me. I'm asking you to think through what Jim's going may mean to you. In the light of what I've described about the situation here and the "on trial" bas on which you would be operating, do you think you could handle a return? ~~Q~~xxxxx It is a terribly tough decision and the more I think about it the less I feel I have the wisdom I need to counsel you. Being close to it, and in it, I see the risks you face perhaps more realistically and clearly than you can. But I also am personally concerned for you and want you to be happy and to make beautiful music.

I want to make clear to you that I will be available to you in any way that will be helpful. I am not Jim McCracken, of course, but perhaps there is another kind of friendship that we can have that will bring you another kind of satisfaction. Whether you return, resign, depart, stay, or whatever, I can guarantee that that friendship will be there from me. I am deeply concerned for you personally and will continue to be so no matter what the future holds for either of us. That being so, I will be much interested in having your reacti@ons to this. Test your feelings with me and let's talk about them - positive or negative. I want to see the best decision for you and for Riverside.

With love,

Gene

P.S. Now I've re-read this and guess I'll mail it quick before I lose my nerve. Believe me, Dick, only my concern for you would allow me to send it.